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SUBJECT: LAF COMMANDER FRETS ABOUT UNIFIL UNDER "TWO  
CABINET" SCENARIO

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: Section 1.4 (b)  
) and (d).

Summary

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¶1. (C) On May 16, NEA A/S David Welch met with Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander General Michel Sleiman. General Sleiman was confident that the LAF would maintain unity and remain neutral politically. However, he admitted that if President Emile Lahoud appoints a second government -- a scenario he made clear he opposed -- there will be "big problems" in maintaining political authority over the armed forces. While the second government would be considered illegitimate in the eyes of the world and two-thirds of Lebanon, it would have allegiance in the south, where the LAF has thousands of troops and UNIFIL is deployed. Sleiman expressed concern that UNIFIL-contributing countries may informally recognize the second government in order to protect their troops. To avoid such an outcome, the General asked if the USG could "pressure" March 14 forces to negotiate with the opposition forces to find a political compromise. Welch noted that the USG, while not opposed to compromise, would not support one at any price. Sleiman concluded by stating that he appreciated USG assistance in providing training and equipment, and felt that the LAF are a "good example" of a professional multi-sectarian military force that other countries in the Middle East should emulate. End Summary.

GENERAL SLEIMAN MAINTAINING  
LAF POLITICAL NEUTRALITY

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¶2. (C) Visiting NEA A/S David Welch and the Ambassador, accompanied by Defense Attache, Poloffs, and NEA staff assistant met with General Michel Sleiman at LAF headquarters in Yarze on May 16. Welch set the tone by commending the LAF as a well-respected institution in Lebanon. The LAF must remain united and "keep the confidence of people" by maintaining security in the country. He stressed that USG policy supported "one government, one army", that represented the Lebanese people. Arms must be under the exclusive control of the recognized government, and not in the hands of Hizballah militants. The increasing levels of U.S. assistance to the LAF derives not only from our confidence in the LAF but also from our confidence in the direction and vision of the Siniora cabinet.

13. (C) General Sleiman acknowledged the importance of maintaining unity within the LAF in the current political environment. Sleiman indicated that he has made every effort to keep the LAF "neutral" and has "instructed" his troops to obey all orders and not to get involved or take sides in the political battle between the March 14 pro-government forces and the March 8 opposition forces. Sleiman did admit that the political stalemate, which could lead to the formation of two governments, would present a "big problem" in establishing who would have final political authority over the armed forces. However, he was confident the LAF would remain neutral and not split along sectarian lines, even in a worst-case political scenario. He said "I will remain neutral between the two sides" and the LAF will concentrate on its primary duty of maintaining security in the country.

UNIFIL'S PRESENCE COULD BE QUESTIONED  
UNDER A SECOND GOVERNMENT  
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14. (C) While noting his opposition to any attempt by President Emile Lahoud to appoint a second cabinet, Sleiman said that he nevertheless had to take the possibility into account. He was particularly worried about what would happen under a two-government scenario in the south. The Siniora government would remain the constitutional, legitimate cabinet, recognized by the international community. But the second government would enjoy the allegiance of the Shia in the south. That is where UNIFIL is deployed and where the LAF has thousands of troops.

15. (C) Sleiman said the safety of UNIFIL troops and the support for continued UNIFIL operations in the field were

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important for stability in Lebanon. With UNIFIL's assistance, there has been progress in border security and the LAF has been deployed in the south; Sleiman does not want to see that reversed. If a second government were formed, the legitimacy of UNIFIL presence in the country could be questioned, and eventually lead to attacks by opposition supporters on UNIFIL units. Indeed, UNIFIL troop contributing nations may end up dealing with the second government in order to protect their troops from attack, since the second government would exercise effective control of Lebanon south of the Litani river.

STRONG VOICES REQUIRED TO STOP  
THE TWO-GOVERNMENT SCENARIO  
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16. (C) Sleiman tried to allay concerns about what it means for the LAF to be "neutral." Jabbing his finger in the air and appearing animated for the first time in the meeting, he said that "I do not accept" a second government's authority. In addition, he indicated that he would contact Maronite Patriarch Sfeir about developing a more unified front, especially among the Christian community, to build a "strong voice" to combat the formation of a second government. (Note: Sleiman mentioned that he was going to meet Patriarch Sfeir after our meeting and indicated that he would discuss this issue. End Note.)

SLEIMAN ASKS FOR USG "PRESSURE" ON MARCH 14  
TO FIND A POLITICAL COMPROMISE  
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17. (C) A/S Welch asked General Sleiman what the USG could do to support his efforts. Sleiman suggested that the USG "pressure" the March 14 camp to negotiate a compromise with the opposition before the situation "got out of hand" and a second government was established. Welch responded that while the USG is open to the possibility of a political compromise, it would not be willing to accept a compromise at "any price" or especially one that would result in the

Siniora government being forced out of power by undemocratic means. The U.S. also will not support any steps that lead toward the establishment of a Syrian controlled Presidency.

SLEIMAN: MULTI-SECTARIAN LAF SERVES  
AS A "GOOD EXAMPLE" FOR THE REGION  
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18. (C) Sleiman concluded the meeting by stating his appreciation for USG assistance to the LAF, and especially the training and equipment provided by the Embassy's Office of Defense Cooperation. He said he was "proud" of the progress the LAF has made in providing security and promoting "democratic values" over the last couple of years. He listed the hurdles that the LAF had faced recently: political instability that threatens LAF unity, multiple mass demonstrations by opposing political camps, new responsibilities in the south and along the borders, terrorism, armed militant groups, Palestinian militant violence, and military attacks by Israel. Yet even with all the difficulties, he felt that the LAF is a "good example" of a professional multi-sectarian military force for other countries in the Middle East.

19. (U) This cable has not been cleared by A/S Welch.  
FELTMAN